

February 15, 2006

Contact: Robin Winchell (202) 225-4031

MELANCON STATEMENT TO SELECT KATRINA COMMITTEE AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

"Let me begin by thanking you, Chairman Davis, and the members of the committee for allowing me the opportunity to participate over the last several months. Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita that followed have turned our lives on the Gulf Coast upside down.

Between Congressman Jefferson, Congressman Taylor, and myself, we represent more homeless, broken, and suffering people than anyone in this Congress.

Nearly six months after Katrina hit, recovery is a myth in South Louisiana. Of the money that has been appropriated, the best guess is that only about half has been spent. And of that, most has gone to emergency needs: temporary housing of which there isn't enough of; debris cleanup which is going too slowly and wasting taxpayer money; and the basic costs of feeding and clothing tens of thousands of evacuees in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

Let me be clear, there is no significant rebuilding. Things are getting worse, not better, and dominos are starting to fall. Banks will begin to call in mortgages. People will declare bankruptcy. Banks will foreclose on tens of thousands of worthless properties. Banks will fail. Even more jobs will be lost. Capital and value will evaporate. And what started out as a regional problem will grow into a national one.

This all started with the levees, Mr. Chairman. And it is with levees where the solution lies.

This was a manmade disaster on many levels, but most particularly it was the failure of the levees in Louisiana that turned a major hurricane into one of the most destructive events in our nation's history. Recognizing this fact is an important step forward. But for the region I represent, we need a commitment for real hurricane protection that will

protect all our citizens.[]

Stronger levees for South Louisiana are like body armor for our soldiers.[] They are critical for our survival.[]

So in terms of this report and the work we've done, I should emphasize that my biggest frustration is that it focuses only on events in August and September.[] Our problems on the Gulf Coast are now.[] This investigation did nothing to help anyone move back home to Louisiana, get a trailer, or begin to rebuild.

That said, the work the committee has done is impressive.[] It has identified major flaws in how we plan for and respond to catastrophic events.[] It has laid bare mistakes made at all levels of government.[] It has shown that 4 years after September 11th, and after a reorganization of half our federal government, we still have not solved basic problems of communication, decision making, and bureaucratic red tape.

These are not heartening findings, Mr. Chairman, and Americans everywhere should take notice.

For my own part, I committed when this process began that I would ask the tough questions loudly and forcefully.[] I pushed in the directions I felt the Committee needed to go and I am proud that those efforts are reflected to some degree in this final product.[]

Overall, I feel that the biggest handicap on the Committee's work was the short time frame it had to complete its report.[] I think that under the leadership of Chairman Davis we generally made the most of that time but I'm sure many Committee members can think of additional questions they would have asked or additional topics they would have explored were it not for our tight deadline.[]

An independent commission would not have these restraints, however, and could more freely delve into these issues as well as having the time and resources to sort out

legitimate claims of executive privilege.

The work of this committee has brought me more attention - more interviews and TV cameras - than most Congressmen get over years of service. My participation, though, has always had an agenda. At every opportunity, I have tried to highlight the problems facing the people of south Louisiana. Unfortunately, that message was often drowned out by the kind of artificial political subplots that seem to consume day to day life in Washington.

I was sent up here to do a job. To work for the people I represent. Every day. Without exception. As hard as I know how.

So today, as we close this particular chapter of Katrina in America, I want to use whatever meager spotlight this process has given me to say once more and in no uncertain terms, that the Gulf Coast of America is not okay. Unless Congress takes action, people will continue to suffer, problems will continue to get worse, and we will have failed to live up to the most basic covenant of American citizenship.

With hurricane season coming around again in just a few short months, the entire Gulf Coast is nervous and on edge. Congress must begin immediately to fix the broken response system and give confidence to everyone that it is safe for them to come home and rebuild.

Mr. Chairman, the Committee's work may be over but I hope our work to fix the system is just beginning. I look forward to working closely with you to make sure that the mistakes that turned a disaster into a catastrophe can never happen again.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, you should be proud of the work you've done and I am honored to have contributed."